

By Csilla Varga

The Visegrad Group as a regional alliance of four Central European countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, defined itself as a cooperation representing and promoting the region's interests in Europe and beyond. In 2004, the V4 reached one of its main objectives, as the four countries became members of the EU and NATO. Followingly, the cooperation worked together on wide-range of issues from economic areas to the engagement with the European Union. However, after decades of cooperation, differing views came to the foreground between certain countries and the V4, in general, and recently it seems that “working together” and representing views of the named Central European countries is more theoretical than practical. This short overview tries to answer the question whether the cooperation in V4 - especially between Hungary and Poland - still exists and formulate a few recommendations how its work could be improved.

Introduction

The Visegrad Group, named after the Hungarian town Visegrad where summit meetings of the Hungarian, Polish and Bohemian kings took place in 1335, originally has the aim of settling disputes and launching economic and political cooperation. After struggles of the 20th century including decades under unwanted Soviet influence, the Visegrad countries decided in 1991 to find new forms of political, economic and cultural cooperation, as they expressed their joint intention to become part of the European and Transatlantic communities that has become reality for all the four countries in 2004.[\[1\]](#)

Addressing regional challenges, such as migration, security, and economic development, and advocate for their shared interests within the European Union, the V4 during the first phase after its establishment can be characterized as a successful cooperation in Europe. The reason behind its relative success was and could be that on their own, the four countries could easily be ignored on contrast to Germany and France, but unified, representing nearly 65 million citizens, they shaped European policies on various fields such as immigration, agriculture and even foreign policy.

In frame of economic cooperation all countries benefitted from enhanced trade and investment opportunities, promoting economic growth and regional development. The shared cultural heritage and history between the states was a powerful basis that, at the beginning, embedded cooperation fostering mutual understanding and synergies regarding education, language, and cultural exchanges. The four states, after the establishment of the V4 prioritized regional security, particularly in the context of NATO, and cooperated on

defense strategies to address common threats. It has to be emphasized as well that the political collaboration of countries initially included aligned political interests, especially concerning EU policies, migration, and sovereignty, advocating for national interests within the larger European context, however, these common political lines have crucially changed, mainly in recent years. Besides the above, energy security, cooperation in energy diversification and infrastructure projects, such as pipelines and energy networks, was also a mutual goal of V4 enhancing energy independence, similarly to regional stability of the region. V4 states sought to maintain stability in Central Europe and the neighboring regions, addressing issues like the rule of law and democracy^[2].

However, already from the beginning of the cooperation, there have been some challenges and differences among them, particularly on issues as the latter, rule of law, democratic values, and responses to EU policies. The V4 from its establishment held and holds regular summits and meetings aiming to maintain and develop their cooperative efforts, as well as established the system of rotating presidency in which framework one of the countries fulfills the tasks of presidency for a year.

Relations between Poland and Hungary in the V4

During the past decades of V4 cooperation, it could be observed that while Poland and Hungary shared many interests within the Group, there are also notable differences in their priorities and approaches that became more and more accentuated in recent years. However, it is often considered that the major dividing line in their relationship has been the recent Ukrainian-Russian war starting in 2022, other issues of non-agreement can also be mentioned in which countries follow different political lines.

Regarding EU relations, Poland generally seeks a strong EU presence and influence, focusing on maintaining beneficial relations with Western Europe, particularly on the area of economic cooperation and political alignment. Hungary represents a more nationalistic stance, often prioritizing sovereignty over EU regulations and sometimes pushing back against European institutions on issues such as migration and rule of law. However, both countries face criticism from EU for their judicial reforms perceived as undermining judicial independence and democratic institutions, the answers of countries to the criticism is different. While the Polish government has been and is more assertive in defending its reforms, Hungary has a more established narrative of defending its policies as part of national identity and sovereignty, often framing it as a cultural and ideological battle.

Migration, mainly after the beginning of the war between Ukraine and Russia from 2022, became one of the major differences and disagreements between the two states. Poland has

shown a willingness to accept Ukrainian refugees, emphasizing humanitarian assistance while maintaining a strict stance on immigration from other regions. Hungary represents a hard-line stance against immigration overall, focusing on border security and resisting EU relocation quotas, which sometimes puts it at odds with Poland's approach to humanitarian crises. Not only Hungary and Poland, but the V4 grouping has come unstuck after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. On the one hand, the Czech Republic and Poland, as two of the strongest supporters of Kyiv in terms of political and military support, argue for even more and faster arms deliveries to the country. On the other hand, Hungary and Slovakia refuse to send weapons to Ukraine and argue for the importance of peace. Especially Hungary has developed a distinct policy of watering down Russia sanctions, questioning Ukraine's EU integration and at one point blocking EU aid for Kyiv.^[3] The aim of Hungary is to maintain peace in all circumstances that cannot be realized when sending troops for Ukraine. According to many experts, absent of a major change in the policy of Hungary, being at this point highly unlikely, the unity of V4 will remain in tatters for the foreseeable future.

Another significant contrast between the two countries is their economic focus, since for Poland economic development, trade relations, and infrastructure projects, EU funds, as well as seeking partnerships with Western countries belongs to major political priorities, Hungary – besides the above – also pursues unique partnerships with non-EU countries and emphasizes a more nationalist economic agenda. Last, but not least, political lines of conduct of the two countries towards Russia also shows different picture: Poland generally views Russia as a primary threat, advocating for a strong stance against Russian influence and seeking closer alignment with NATO. Hungary, on the contrary, maintains a more conciliatory approach towards Russia, often emphasizing the importance of economic relations and energy cooperation with Russia leading to tensions with Poland's more hardened stance. Therefore, it can be certainly stated and shortly concluded that Hungary's position vis-a-vis Moscow from spring 2022 significantly worsened the relations with Warsaw. For Poland, Orbán's pro-Russian stance was unacceptable and regarded Russian aggression as a fundamental threat, much more dangerous than any claim coming from Brussels. The relations between Warsaw and Budapest deteriorated rapidly, and these differing and conflictual views shadow, among other issues, the general activity of the V4.

Cooperation or only certain toleration between Hungary and Poland?

The second. However, countries criticise each other more and more often and openly. As already highlighted, differences presently are more characteristic than cooperation. Besides the above, as a crucially important additional aspect it has to be noted that the Polish

elections in October 2023 also resulted in systematic change in Polish politics with the ascension to power of the former opposition parties to the long-serving, populist, conservative PiS government. The new centrist government, led by former Prime Minister Donald Tusk, immediately began a program of “de-PiS-ification” of the country’s media, courts, and economy in an effort to return the country to normative congruence with EU standards^[4]. In the process, the new Polish leadership moved even further away from certain views of Budapest, shortly explained above.

Not only between Budapest and Warsaw, but in the V4 two camps have developed, in general, as mentioned regarding their views on the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as in connection with other issues. On the one hand, Slovakia and Hungary represent almost the same opinions, Robert Fico, the Prime Minister of Slovakia and Viktor Orbán stick to their pro-Russian rhetoric. On the other hand, the Czech Republic and Poland support Ukraine in the war, for instance to purchase up to 800,000 artillery rounds for Ukraine from suppliers outside of Europe. Concerning other topics, it can also be stated that Prague and Warsaw often promote Western efforts, views and political lines. By contrast, Bratislava and Budapest belong to the minority of Member States often being in opposition with the views of Brussels and being openly on the side of Moscow. Consequently, V4 unity is presently not able to show up short-term prospects of meaningful cooperation. In conclusion, with the eruption of the war in Ukraine, cooperation among Visegrad countries has come to a standstill, and the most significant division arose between Poland and Hungary. It is highly likely that in the upcoming period the success of the format will largely hinge on the ways and issues on which Donald Tusk and Viktor Orbán can collaborate, also strongly influencing the success of Central Europe in defending and promoting the region’s interests.

Conclusions and recommendations for improving bilateral relations

As shortly explained above, V4 as a cooperation still exists, however, currently it became a more formal alliance where the four states are divided into two groups. Disagreements came to the forefront mainly after the break out of the current Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as after the Polish elections of October 2023 that resulted in fundamentally different political lines of the two political leaders. In spite of conflicts and differing views, V4 formally exists, but their cooperation should be continued more effectively and practically in the future. It cannot be neglected that since its establishment, V4 brought with itself significant results for member countries, and in the past, it could effectively represent the interests of these four states in Europe. The possibility to enforce their interests is a powerful tool that could not be left behind and neglected in the future, however, cooperation in the V4 should be reformed and laid on renewed foundations.

As practical recommendations for the Visegrad Group, as well as the cooperation between Hungary and Poland, the following steps, objectives could be realized:

1. States and V4 should continue cooperation on those areas that are slightly “more neutral” or void of conflicting opinions, such as certain economics issues, culture, science, infrastructure, business, etc. and that represent the interests for all V4 countries in the EU;
2. In spite of differing views on “high political issues”, countries should hold bilateral and V4 meetings in the future as well in order to try reconciling interests, taking stock of problems and mainly for maintaining their relations;
3. Discussing their motivation behind their policies and decisions in order to find common understanding that leads to a more successful cooperation.

[1] Official website of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2021/2022:
<https://v4.mfa.gov.hu/page/visegrad-cooperation>

[2] See the objectives of the V4 in Visegrad Declarations available at the official website of the Visegrad Group: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations>

[3] See for instance: RadioFreeEurope: The Visegrad Group: When 2 + 2 Doesn't Equal 4, February 27, 2024:
<https://www.rferl.org/a/visegrad-hungary-poland-czech-slovakia-disunity/32837670.html>

[4] Robert Beck: The Visegrád Four: Disunity in Central Europe, February 23, 2024, Foreign Policy Research Institute:
<https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/02/the-visegrad-four-disunity-in-central-europe/>.

The Visegrad Group – does this cooperation (still) exist? What are the common interests of Poles and Hungarians in the V4?



Csilla Varga has earned her BA and MA degrees in International Relations at the Corvinus University of Budapest where she also obtained her PhD degree at Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science in 2021. She is currently a senior researcher of the Danube Institute of Budapest, and also a researcher of the Eötvös József Research Centre – Europe Strategy Research Institute of the Ludovika University of Public Service. Her main research area is the political representation and participation of national minorities, analysis of the situation of Hungarian national minorities in neighbouring countries and the politics of the V4 countries. She also gained experience in public administration at the Prime Minister's Office, in the Ministry Foreign Affairs and Trade and in the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister.



The article was created as part of the project entitled “Dual voices of experts in international affairs: Poland and Hungary” implemented by the Sobieski Institute, grant no.: DOF-K/IF/RD12/15/2024. The grantee is the Wacław Felczak Institute for Polish-Hungarian Cooperation.

The publication reflects only the views of the author(s) and cannot be associated with the official position of the Wacław Felczak Polish-Hungarian Cooperation Institute.